

PENTECOST 8
14/7/24
CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

With song and dance,

we worship God.

With heart and mind,

we worship God.

With joy and enthusiasm,

we worship God.

With our works as well as our words,

we worship God.

In the heart of the faith community,

we worship God.

With the whole of our being,

let us worship God!

Opening Prayer

In the peace of the evening,

we know that God, our wonderful creator, is with us.

In the joy of a mother with her baby,

we are sure that God, our loving Parent, smiles on us.

In times of peace within the struggle,

we are assured that God's encouragement secures us.

In clear moments of hope when sickness is upon us,

we rejoice that it is God in whom our security rests.

And in this act of worship,

compassionate God, and we give thanks for God's presence with us. Amen.

HYMN 134 Praise my soul

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYEKAEYRcIA>

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Eternal God,

whose loving-kindness is boundless,

and whose goodness endures forever,

we praise your name and worship you.

We give thanks that you shine in our darkness,

revealing the truth and hope that guide our ways.

We praise you for the presence of the Holy Spirit

who strengthens us in times of trouble,

who comforts us in times of distress,

and who reminds us that we are held in your grace and love for eternity.
Receive our adoration and praise, we pray,
for you are the core of all life and the means of salvation.
May your justice and truth endure forever.

Merciful Saviour,

We offer our confession in humility,
desiring to be more fully your people.
We ask for forgiveness for failing to give all we are
and have to the work of the gospel.
We are sorry for those times when we knew what you expected of us,
but our courage failed us, and we were found wanting.
We regret those times when the needs of others were apparent
but we looked the other way or ignored their plight.

Holy one,
we know that the way of Christ is a demanding way.
If we have been deaf to your Word, renew us.
If we have failed in proclaiming the good news, rebuke us.
If we have been confused or uncertain, inspire us.
In everything, may we be shaped by your Spirit
in the character and ministry of Christ,
in whose name we offer our prayer. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

God knows the intent of our hearts
and longing to renew us
is more willing to forgive us than we can imagine.
As we have confessed and repented,
let us be confident of the truth that our sin is forgiven.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

READINGS

- **Ephesians 1:3–14**

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. 5 He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace 8 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight 9 he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. 11 In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him

who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, 12 so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; 14 this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

- **Mark 6:14–29**

14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him." 15 But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." 17 For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. 18 For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him. 21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 22 When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests, and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." 23 And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." 24 She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." 25 Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." 26 The king was deeply grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27 Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, 28 brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. 29 When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

HYMN 143 Immortal, invisible, God only wise
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PS3QinSmPHI>

SERMON

Looking at the news this week I have been struck at all the horror. A father tries to burn down his house with everyone inside killing three innocent children. A missile strikes a children's hospital in the Ukraine.

At the same time Israel and its neighbours are trying to bomb one another out of existence. In New Guinea tribal conflicts led to mass killings just a few weeks ago. On the streets of our towns and cities there seems to be a plague of domestic violence.

On just about every occasion everyone killed or injured were innocent people who happened to be in the wrong place! This senseless violence is tragic, to put it mildly. All too often to people

orchestrating the mass violence are well away from the point of impact. Even some social media stars want to promote violence against women and children with apparent impunity.

The plight of those impacted by this violence can be traumatic for the hapless victims and their cries for safety can be lost in the bottomless thirst for retribution for things which happened recently or long ago.

In the light of this week's readings I am challenged to ask the questions:

- Where is God in the middle of this mayhem?
- Is there anything that we can do to prevent this from happening?
- Why do these senseless acts of violence keep happening?

When we are bombarded by all this violence and needless suffering it is only natural to wonder where God fits into the picture. For me it starts at the Cross with the image of unfettered violence unleashed on an innocent victim.

It is important to recognise that the manner of the suffering that Jesus went through on the cross was not unusual in those days. Most of the audience that Mark wrote his gospel for would have witnessed that barbaric practice. Just a few years before Mark wrote his Gospel there was a rebellion in Jerusalem. After the sacking of Jerusalem by the Roman legion there would have been bodies hanging beside all the surrounding roads.

In the Gospel accounts Jesus doesn't make any particular emphasis about his death being something special or unique. In fact he openly reflects back on the treatment of the prophets of the past. His fate seems to have been looming large on His horizon.

Basically Jesus tells His followers that what was going to happen to Him was no different from what happened to so many prophets before Him, including his cousin John the Baptist. We can see this in the parable of the mutinous vineyard tenants.

The owner having sent a series of servants to collect the rent with each being more severely mis-treated by the tenants. This culminates with the brutal slaying of the respected son of the vineyard's owner. This clearly tells us that Jesus saw His death as not being unique, nor was it unexpected.

Now look at the Gospel passage about John the Baptist. There are strong parallels here. John was seen by those around him as the last of the Hebrew prophets. We should note here that we have already heard of his death in the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark. So why is it now recounted in such gruesome detail?

In Mark's Gospel we are in the middle of a series of stories about the nature and cost of ministry and discipleship. This was clearly being shared for those who wanted to follow Jesus. Following Jesus and sharing His message was not designed to allow for a long and untroubled

life. We still live in a world of hostility and violence. Just by being a follower of Jesus today might still attract even more trouble than we already have.

While not exactly the same there are strong parallels between John's death and the crucifixion of Jesus. Both were arrested because they had exposed abuses of power by those in charge. John had called out the adulterous betrayal of Herod's brother. Jesus openly exposed the failures of the religious elite in the Temple and Jerusalem's establishment. Both victims shone a piercing light on hypocrisy and the lack of integrity by those in power.

Both Jesus and John end up with their fate in the misguided hands of those in power. Herod hates John the Baptist for calling him out yet at the same time he is drawn to the message that John is preaching condemning the evils being perpetrated in that society.

Pilate thinks that Jesus is naïve and could be described as a ridiculous dreamer. Pilate tries to engage Jesus but gets nowhere. Both leaders find themselves caught up and pushed into making fateful decisions by blood thirsty onlookers without those leaders having the integrity to make the right decision.

Herod and his banquet guests have been drawn in because of the evocative dancing by Salome who is then easily able to manipulate that despot into disposing of the man her mother hated so much. A severed head on a platter is all that will quench that queen's vengeance.

It was a similar crowd that shouted Hosannah as Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey and then transformed their actions to become a blood thirsty mob seeking the crucifixion of that same Jesus. In both cases the decision makers might have been inclined to stop the murder but were unwilling to go against the mob's bold blood lust.

Like we have seen over the last few weeks it is in the differing parallel stories that we can see a deeper truth come out. Jesus' death is just the latest in a long line of murdered prophets.

We find that Jesus' and John's deaths were not unique. Violence then, as now, is endemic throughout the world. It can be seen in the deaths of so many innocent people down through the ages, including in the middle east and a suburb near you today. On each occasion there are enraged mobs baying for retribution over real and perceived 'wrongs.'

Going along with this are the leaders who do not have the courage to stand up to the mob's outrageous demands for victims to be sacrificed in the name of 'the mob's wounded honour.' And partners who see that they can take the lives of the one they were supposed to love and care for.

Now we can see the connections of honour stoked retribution and we can see connections all over the place where there is mob violence.

For instance there are traumatised and dispossessed people seeking asylum in a country like ours who are also shining a light on the excesses of our lifestyles. It is easy for a frenzied mob to start calling for these innocent victims to be the object of mob violence as people seek to re-establish their life. The casting out of Jesus comes along side the persecution of asylum seekers.

Another example might be the so-called reality shows of a few years ago when we targeted and humiliated people based only on their weight and body shape. These shows only served to highlight our cultural obsession with food, thinness and impossible images of the correct body shape. I doubt that many people could live up to those impossible, and probably dangerous, body image objectives. Once again, we were being bombarded with unreal ideas of what is acceptable and beautiful through the eyes of some very unqualified people who had been given cult status by the media only seeking ratings.

Closer to home there is the tendency to look for a victim to be a scapegoat when we feel threatened and under pressure to conform. We can consider attacking someone who is perhaps more vulnerable than us. Or we want to bring down people who we consider to be more capable and a threat to us.

Then we come back to the situation where the bombs start to fly across the Israel/Gaza boarder with no sign that it will ever stop. Both sides are constantly looking to the other as the scapegoat.

Is there a way out of the cycles of objectification and ostracism and violence?

Yes, it can come about when we recognise the way of freedom that Jesus opens up for us. We need to recognise the solidarity of Jesus with the victims of these various acts of violence and humiliation. This means that we should be galvanised into action. There are plenty of times when we find ourselves as victims. There are times when we find ourselves isolated and misunderstood and unfairly accused and abused.

In those times of pain and suffering we find the suffering messiah standing in solidarity with us. And the call to us, in those experiences, is to seek to position ourselves with the victims, and to look at all these situations through the eyes of the victim.

In Jesus we have encountered the victim without resentment, the victim who knows his own murderers as victims, as those caught in the web of hostility and violence and unable to break themselves free.

In Jesus we encounter the victim who is able to pray for the forgiveness of his own killers, and was able to come back to us, raised to life by God, as the sacrificed victim whose death exposes the sickness of all our violence. Those wounded hands are open in welcome and mercy and the absolute absence of resentment or vengefulness for the benefit of everyone.

It is only as we find ourselves covered in that overwhelming mercy that we can begin to become part of the solution instead of continuing to be part of the problem.

It is only as we begin to reciprocate those actions with love and spread it around that we can find the courage to stop perpetuating the cycle of declarations of "they will pay a very heavy price", and instead say "they will face a very awesome outpouring of resilient forgiveness, just as we have been saved by a very awesome and resilient outpouring of grace."

In His suffering death, Jesus calls us to solidarity with all who suffer, and in His complete lack of vengefulness, the risen Christ offers the hope of healing from our violence.

HYMN 647 Comfort, comfort all my people
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rt_CaPi_yjY

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

May all we are and all we have
be an offering of our love and service
for the sake of Christ. Amen.

May the gifts we bring be a token of our desire
to serve your realm and reign, O God.

May they be used in service of those whose needs are greatest.

May our lives be dedicated to your mission,
proclaiming your love and salvation for all.

Amen

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Today as we are reminded of the gifts that our ours through Christ, and the responsibility of living as God wants us to, we come to Him with hearts that are open to the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. And as we continue our Sunday prayers for congregations across the Hunter Presbytery, we will be including a prayer for the Maitland & East Maitland Wesley Uniting Church congregation. Since Covid they have combined their zoom with face-to-us services, a bit like us here, and they have 25 to 35 worshipping. They have a fellowship group that provides meals for Carrie's Place and so support those struggling with Domestic Violence and also Homelessness. They also enjoy a monthly evening meal together that they have called "Open Table," and they are part of East Maitland's Mission Plan.

Let us pray:

Loving and gracious God, as across the globe we see so much pain and distress, we pray for your peace to come upon us here today, and all humans who live on this earth you created for us. We pray for democratic process across the nations of the world so that through our systems of governance we might love our neighbour no matter what the race, culture, or nationality.

Teach us not to rely on weapons of war, but to find ways through difference that will enable all to live in dignity and fairness.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we hear today of John the Baptist's life coming to a cruel end, a precursor of what happened to Jesus being crucified on the cross. Thank you for their steadfastness against the worst the world could do to them. When we face difficulties, situations that we think we cannot cope with, we ask that you would graciously fill us with your Holy Spirit, that we might have the grace and strength to stand firm to your call upon our lives so that we might love one another as you have loved us.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, we thank you for our congregation here at Caves Beach. Thank you for the opportunity to worship you freely here on Sundays, for the joy of friendship among us, and for the opportunities you give to us to reach out with your love to others. Thank you for the links we enjoy with the pre-school staff and children. And likewise, we pray for all congregations across the Hunter Presbytery, and especially today for the Maitland-East Maitland Wesley Uniting Church. We pray for their Leaders' Group as they implement their Mission Plan; for their Sunday worship as they connect both with those at home and those who can attend at their church; we pray too, for their Open Table meals and their Fellowship group as they reach out to their community. O God, we pray that as your people, you will strengthen all Christians to proclaim the gospel in service, word and sacrament.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Compassionate God, as we hear of so many women and children losing their lives to domestic violence, and even children in care being sexually abused, we pray that government resources will be provided to those who are crying out for help. May our leaders consider the needs of those in harm's way who need safety and protection from all that is wrong, and may they keep focused so that families are freed from despair, poverty and exclusion. We pray strength in mind and body for case-workers who are over-loaded, and we pray healing of mind for the paramedics and police who are called into such tragic situations. And we give thanks for those who in their own time provide pro bono legal advice. Help us all not to be complacent.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Loving God, over this winter-time we are seeing people around us struggling with colds, flu, Covid and other ailments. Also we have those among us who are in grief and sorrow. We give thanks that you are the God who brings mercy and wholeness. And so we pray for comfort and healing upon all who are in sorrow, need, sickness, or any other trouble. (A time of silence now as we name and place our loved ones in God's hands for His blessing of comfort, healing and

peace.....) Lord Jesus, give to medical staff, aged care staff, family members, indeed all who care for these our loved ones: wisdom, patience and gentleness and, to us all, your peace.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

And we draw these our prayers together now, as we sing together the prayer our Lord taught us:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

HYMN 442 All praise to our redeeming Lord

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2Qhk8zl7Jo>

BENEDICTION

The way of Christ is demanding.
It requires our faith and courage.
Christ shows us the way and calls us to follow.
Let us go from here, willing to embrace costly love as our way,
to seek to serve with open hearts and minds.
And may the truth and justice of Christ,
the unlimited love of God,
and the power of the Holy Spirit,
go with us and be with us forever.
Amen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liH_HdkWs74